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An Interview with Ralph Ellison

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An Interview with Ralph Ellison · *Richard Kostelanetz*

RK: What follows is an interview that I did with Ralph Ellison for the BBC in the fall of 1965. Keep that date in mind when you hear some of these replies. His reputation as one of America's best writers is based on only one novel, which was published in 1952. *Invisible Man* received the National Book Award the following year and in 1965 a large poll of American critics and writers judged *Invisible Man* to be the best single novel of the post-war period.

Ellison, born in Oklahoma City, in 1914, once wrote that from his youth he has been haunted by the ideal of a renaissance man. He first studied music at Tuskegee University in Alabama, then sculpture in New York, before writing became his dominant interest. He has also worked in audio-electronics and as a professional photographer. In addition to fiction he has written criticism of jazz, literature, and culture. He has lectured at many American universities, and from 1970–79 was the Albert Schweitzer Professor at New York University. What is particularly impressive, if not awesome about Ellison, is not only the diversity of his cultural interests but the high excellence he achieves in those he chooses to favor.

RK: Your collection of essays *Shadow and Act* is dedicated to Morteza Sprague; and like others, I have wondered who is Morteza Sprague? Do you look at him as a hero or as a friend?

RE: Morteza Sprague, a graduate of Hamilton College, was a professor of English, and hardly older than several of his students. As a Tuskegee freshman I took his senior course in the nineteenth Century English novel. He was an honest teacher, for when I went to him about Eliot and such people, he told me he hadn't given much attention to them and that they weren't taught at Tuskegee. But he told me what to do about it: the places to find discussions and criticism.

Although I didn't know Albert Murray at Tuskegee—it wasn't until we made contact in New York City that we became friends—he was also one of Sprague's students. Then, after graduating and pursuing graduate studies elsewhere, Murray joined Sprague on the staff of the English department and they became close friends. Yes, I consider Sprague a friend and dedicated my essays to him because he was an honest teacher.

RK: You went to Tuskegee first as a composer . . .

RE: I went there as one who wanted to become a composer, because they had a good band and an orchestra. I was a trumpeter. They had a rather thriving music school. They also had William L. Dawson, a composer who had become quite famous as a choir director. The Tuskegee choir opened Radio City Music Hall when I was still in high school; this really got me excited! It didn't seem possible that I might go to Julliard, but then I got the offer of a scholarship at Tuskegee.

RK: Did you feel at all disadvantaged being in a Negro college in the South?

RE: No, I didn't feel disadvantaged. Oddly enough, the library, which was so important to me, was a rather well-rounded library. I spent a lot of time there—worked there one year. I always hung around the stacks; that was what I needed. I knew about Kittredge of Harvard, and so on; those people's names were in the air. A few of us used to talk about how nice it would have been, if we could have attended Harvard, and to have studied under such teachers, but the sense of being disadvantaged was nothing that bothered me. You got there to study music and you studied music. It wasn't any easier because you were at a Negro college. You always expected that a little later on you would finish there and then go somewhere else; perhaps to Julliard, where you were pretty certain that you would get some of the best. But the teachers themselves held degrees from Oberlin and the Boston Conservatory, and so on. Hazel Harrison had been one of Busoni's prize pupils who lived in his Berlin house along with a few others, like Percy Grainger, before the rise of Nazism drove the non-Aryans out of Germany. She had Prokofiev manuscripts—I used to handle Prokofiev manuscripts at Tuskegee! I didn't play the piano beyond the small technique needed to work on one's harmonic exercises, but I learned a great deal about music and the related arts from Miss Harrison.

Anyway, you don't think about the problems of being a Negro when you're trying to get an education. When you're in the classroom, you're thinking about the specific problem that is before you, not the larger sociological problem—even though you are quite aware that you are Negro, and that in leaving the sanctuary of the college you're likely to run into possible discomfort, discourtesy, and even violence . . .

RK: How did you turn to writing?

RE: Actually, I turned to writing before I realized what had happened.

Sometime during my high school days, it must've been around the eleventh grade, I had a very bad cold that just clung to me. The school nurse, Miss Waller, saw me on the street one day—I was still coughing—and she made me go to a lung clinic at one of the hospitals. I had to wait in a reception room with all these obviously ill people. I was rather horrified and I began to try to describe what was going on to some of the people who were around me. I was doing it in the style, I thought, of O. O. McIntyre, who was a syndicated columnist who used to appear in the Oklahoma City papers. I remember that as a first doodling with writing. The next thing I did was to set to verse a thing on the swamp country by the Southern writer Albion Tourgée. I took this to the American literature teacher and he looked at me as though I had gone out of my mind, because I hadn't shown too much interest in the class itself. I got passing grades but I had never tried to do any writing or shown any real interest in literature as it was being taught, although I read quite a lot; so you have that in the background. It was nothing that I did consciously or with any intensity, but those were the beginnings. The other thing was, reading the prefaces of Shaw when I was in high school. A friend's parents' library had all of Shaw and I thought those prefaces—I think the first one I read was a preface to *Candida*—most incongruous, but there it was. I remember that in my themes in school, I tried to get some of the Shavian quality in my writing but there again, no one paid any attention to it and I didn't take it seriously.

RK: What was the point after that?

RE: The point after that was that I became very, very much involved with modern letters after I read *The Waste Land*. I was so intrigued that I started reading all the commentaries that I could find. Among them Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, Harriet Monroe's book of criticism, and Babette Deutsch's book of criticism. I read a lot of Pound, and Eliot's essays. Evidently I was actually trying my hand at writing poetry during those days, because years later Al Murray pointed out to me that he had found some of my attempts in a library book. I suppose I blanked that out of my mind. Incidentally, I never wrote a decent poem, but the conscious concern with writing began there at Tuskegee: again without my being conscious that it was a forecast of what I was going to do. It was a kind of innocent word-play. Then I came to New York during my junior year (1936) intending to work that summer and return. That didn't work out, but a few months after I'd been in New York I met Richard Wright. He asked me to review

a book for the magazine, *New Challenge*, that he'd come to New York to edit. After my review was published, he asked me to do a short story. I had never tried to do a piece of fiction, never in my life! So I made my first attempt at a short story at Wright's suggestion. My story got to the galley proof stage, but then, thanks to a dispute between Wright and his fellow editors, the magazine was discontinued before my story could be published. Naturally, I was disappointed, but that's how I got started writing fiction.

RK: What did you find in Eliot?

RE: I found imagery for one thing; I found overtones of a sort of religious pattern which I could identify with my own background. I also saw a style of improvisation — that quality of improvising which is very close to jazz. Most people think I'm being pretentious when I say this but it grows out of a similar and quite American approach to the classics, just as Armstrong and any other jazz musician of that period would take a theme and start improvising. Then he would pay his respects to *Aida*, to any number of operas, to light opera, or to religious music. All this came out in the course of the improvisation. It was these pinpoints of familiarity that made me want to solve the mystery. *The Waste Land* had the quality of a conundrum anyway, so you were really trying to trace the thing down and make it whole within your own mind.

RK: What's American about *The Waste Land*?

RE: Aside from its being the creation of an American, it's American in the rather ruthless assault it makes upon the literature of the past. It assumes possession, it abstracts, it recasts in terms of Eliot's sense of life and his sense of the possibility of language, of poetry, and of culture.

RK: Also American in its references . . .

RE: Eliot is full of American folklore. He knew quite a lot about it. It would've been inescapable, coming from St. Louis, not to have been aware of the odd juxtapositions that you get in this country of cultural forces, cultural products; high culture, popular culture, it's all mixed. For the poet, he can mix them up any way he wants. Anything and everything is there to be used, and there is this kind of irreverent reverence which Americans are apt to have for the good products of the past. I think you get all of that in Eliot.

RK: So when Eliot speaks of the tradition, he means not only the classical tradition, but the tradition of cultural materials around him in St. Louis?

RE: I think so. This is often missed but I think it is very much there for

the eye, and the ear that is willing to listen. It amuses me that “under the bam, under the boo” line comes out of a Negro song written by Cole and Johnson in one of their popular musicals of the 1890s, when a group of Negroes dominated the American musical stage.

RK: Unlike some other Afro-American writers, you choose to live in America, indeed, near Harlem. Why?

RE: Living here is the only living that I could do as a novelist. I lived in Italy for two years when I had the Rome Prize. But, for all of its difficulties, I had to face the challenges of the United States. Now that’s one thing. Why do I live always close to other Negroes? Because I have to hear the language. My medium is language, and there is a Negro idiom, in fact there are many Negro idioms in the American language. I have to hear that sounding in my ears, I have to. A place like Harlem, or any American Negro community, has an expressiveness about it which is almost Elizabethan. Things are revealed in speech in the streets. There’s a lot of humor and the language is always feeding back to the past; it’s throwing up wisdom, it’s throwing up patterns and I never know but when I’m going to hear something just in the street which is going to be the making of some piece of fiction that I’m trying to write.

RK: Is it fair then to speak of Harlem as a ghetto?

RE: I think that this is one of the most damaging misuses of a concept that has ever come about in the United States. A ghetto implies a cultural and religious distance. That’s where the term came from.

RK: It came to describe the Jewish neighborhoods . . .

RE: That’s right.

RK: . . . on the Lower East Side . . .

RE: Not only the Lower East Side but it comes from Europe, as we know, and it had a content there which obscures further the relationships between American whites and American Negroes. Language for one thing, for another the patterns of myth—of universal myths, so to speak, of Christian myth, and so on as they have been given embodiment in terms of Negro patterns. It’s not too difficult to look at John Henry and see the Hercules myth. If you are aware of the connections, if you know where to look. It’s not too unusual to see that the rhetoric of a Negro sermon, for instance, can be traced back to Shakespeare, if you know where to look, or to the metaphysical poets. I’m not saying that these very often unlettered ministers have read John Donne, but on the other hand they are possessors of a living tradition.

RK: And have heard people who have read John Donne.

RE: That's right. Actually you find now that the great tradition of nineteenth century eloquence in oratory is most alive within the Negro community. We don't find it so much in Congress anymore, but you find it among Negroes, especially right in the churches.

RK: This is because American Negro culture is more oral?

RE: Yes, it is still more oral than literary but it would be a mistake to look upon it as primitive, because it is informed by the usual American concerns.

RK: By this you mean that Negro culture can't be anything but American culture?

RE: In the United States it's a part of the general American culture, the language itself. The American English would not have the same music in it if it were not for the existence of great numbers of Negroes and great numbers of white Southerners, who have learned their English partially from Negroes. This is not true on the other hand where you have people who spoke or who speak a different language. In Harlem, in fact in most so-called Negro ghettos, a lot of Negroes do not spend most of their time there. They work outside. They work as domestics in white homes; they're cooking, they're taking care of children, they're teaching them their manners, they're changing their diapers; they are completely involved in America on that level. The music, the dances that Americans do are greatly determined by Negro American style, by a Negro American sense of elegance, by an American Negro sense of what the American experience should be, by what Negroes feel about how an American should move, should express himself. The ghetto concept obscures this. It's much better to say you have slums. It's an old term and it doesn't cause as much confusion. It's economic, not cultural.

RK: One way in which the American tradition appears in *Invisible Man* is in the tradition of story-telling. People are telling stories about experiences.

RE: Yes, that's true. And I connect this with certain problems in the novel. James, for instance, had some negative things to say about the first person point of view making for loose and baggy monsters. And I happen to feel that one of the things I wanted to prove, to myself at least, was that you could write a dramatic novel using the first person.

RK: But the blues singer sings in the first person, too.

RE: Yes, and the blues singer is one of the most developed of existentialist poets, but we never think about it in that way. It wasn't until Sartre began to have his novels translated here that I became aware that some of the blues were much better statements of the existentialist position than he was able to embody, in *Nausea* for instance . . .

RK: For example?

RE: Well, "Troublin' Mind" is an example, any number of Leroy Carr's blues . . .

RK: Would you say then analogously your book is to Western literature as jazz is to Western music? And, in effect a product of Negro American culture? Which is still American, which is still Western?

RE: Yes, I would just point out that they are both Western, they are both American precisely because they try to use any and everything which has been developed by great music and great literature. As for music, on the other hand, I suspect that the one body of music which expresses the United States—which expresses this continent—is jazz and the blues. What we have with Western music, with so-called classical music, is an American version of Western classical music.

RK: What do you mean when you say that many books written by Negro writers are intended for a white audience?

RE: Well, I think that when you examine these books you will find that in expressing Negro protest the writer directs his protest, his emotion, his plot even toward a white audience. I suppose, what I mean by this is that the books tend to be overly sociological, that they are ultimately about civil rights, about sociological conditions rather than an attempt to reveal personality living within certain conditions.

RK: Isn't there a sense in which the white audience expects a Negro to be angry about the condition of being Negro in America?

RE: I'm afraid so, and if the conditions were good I think that many white readers would expect the Negro writer to be angry because he wasn't white. I mean you have that thing operating underneath. More seriously, I try to use an approach which is dictated not by my anger or my lack of anger, not by my protest or any lack of feelings of protest, but by the logic of the art itself. I write what my imagination throws up to me and I must feed this back through my own critical sensibility. That critical sensibility is informed by a sense of life which grows in its immediacy out of my being part of the Negro American group. That's where I find an oral

tradition, that's where I found my closest friends who are a great part of my life, that's where my parents were, that's where my friends were. That's where emotion, that is the emotional content of ideas and symbols and dreams, is to be found, where I can release myself, release whatever creative capacity that I have. There is a kind of ideal reader and that ideal reader would be a Negro who was in full possession of all the subtleties of literature and art and politics. You see what I mean? Not out of racist motives do I imagine this ideal reader, but to give my own experience, both acquired and that which I was born with, its broadest possibilities.

RK: Is there any particular person who is your ideal reader?

RE: No, I don't think so. The best reader of course is the person who has the imagination, regardless of what his color is. Some readers, I suspect bring more imagination to a work than the author has put into it. And when you get that kind of reader you're very fortunate because he gives you a stature, let's say, that you haven't really earned.

RK: Well, there are ways of misreading *Invisible Man*. One way is to think that it's autobiographical.

RE: Yes, that's true. It is not autobiographical.

RK: But the first person narrator?

RE: Yes, I did this, as I say, as an attempt to see whether I could write in the first person and make it interesting, make it dramatic and give it a strong dramatic drive.

RK: But there's a sense in which *Invisible Man* might first strike a reader as a catalogue of adverse experiences of an innocent Negro in America. Is this a correct interpretation?

RE: I would think that it was an incorrect and sentimental interpretation inasmuch as the narrator of the book could have stopped much of his experience had he been willing to accept the harsh nature of reality. He creates much of his own fate. I don't look upon him as heroic in that way. I think that he made a lot of mistakes. But many white readers certainly are so sentimental about the Negro thing that they can't see that.

RK: Isn't one of his more universal failures a failure of perception? He doesn't understand his own experience. He doesn't understand why he fails.

RE: I think so. It's a failure of perception and it's a sort of wrong-headed desire to summon up, to take on an identity imposed upon him by the outside, when we know very well that each individual has to discover himself

and the world for himself. Usually this is done through some sort of pain. But I must say that this is a tough guy because he goes through many, many experiences which should have driven him to himself and to his reality.

RK: In what sense does the title apply? How is the narrator or the Negro an invisible man?

RE: Well, I wasn't writing about *the* Negro. I was writing about a specific character, in specific circumstances, at a specific time. The invisibility, there is a joke about that which is tied up with the sociological dictum that Negroes in the United States have a rough time because we have *high* visibility.

RK: Your color is very apparent.

RE: High pigmentation, so the formula has it, which is true. No one will ever mistake me for white. But the problem for the narrator of *Invisible Man* is that he creates his own invisibility to a certain extent by not asserting himself. He does not do the thing which will break the pattern, which will reveal himself, until far along in the book. So he is not a victim. At least not merely a victim. He is a man who is wrong-headed.

RK: For some years now you have been working on a second novel. Parts have appeared to critical acclaim. Why does it take so long to write a novel?

RE: Well, it takes me a long time because I have a deep uncertainty about what I am doing. I try to deal with large bodies of experience which I see as quite complex. There is such a tendency to reduce the American experience, especially when it centers around the Negro experience. I'm constantly writing—I write a lot—but I have to put it aside. It has to gel, then I come back. If I still react positively to it, if I can still see possibilities of development, then I keep it.

RK: As a novelist, what do you think is the ultimate purpose of your profession?

RE: For me, I think it is to seize upon the abiding patterns of the American experience as they come up within my own part of the American nation, and project those patterns, those personality types, those versions of man's dilemmas, in terms of symbolic actions. Reduce it to eloquent form—that sounds perhaps pretentious but I think that's what the novel does—

RK: Oh, so modest!

RE: Oh, I don't mean to be too modest.

RK: Do you mean that you don't assume that the novelist can have any great social reforming power or have any great expansive power or any great power as a spokesman?

RE: I think that the good novelist tries to provide his reader with vivid depictions of certain crucial and abiding patterns of human existence. This he attempts to do by reducing the chaos of human experience to artistic form. And when successful he provides the reader with a fresh vision of reality. For then through the symbolic action of his characters and plot he enables the reader to share forms of experience not immediately his own. And thus the reader is able to recognize the meaning and value of the presented experience and the essential unity of human experience as a whole. This may, or may not, lead to social change or bring the novelist recognition as a spokesman. But it is, nevertheless, a form of social action, and an important task. Yes, and in its own right a form of social power.

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